Ayn Rand: To be Selfish or Not to be Selfish- That is the Question

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ABSTRACT

Ayn Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1961) is comprised of a philosophy that defies the entire premise of what our education system is and shall be built upon. The "Objectivist" perspective has depicted a clear distinction between the "Have's" and the "Have Not's" or the Bourgeoisie and Proletariat. The "Objectivist" perspective believes that the "Have's" are entitled to that which others are not, which alarmingly includes education. The "Objectivist" philosophy would be detrimental in an already deteriorating educational system and would thus take part in its total demise.

Introduction

In Ayn Rand's *The Virtue of Selfishness* (1961), "Objectivists" view the education system as being doomed and irreparable. In their opinion, education is wasted on the Proletariat or working class and is essential to the Bourgeoisie or elite. They view the education system as a great entity like the engine invented by John Galt: Here today, gone tomorrow. This perspective that education is wasted on the poor or working class is in opposition to the entire American educational philosophy. As educators, our goal is to educate every child, so we relentlessly review data and develop programs that will assist us in reaching the needs of every child. In education we often ask the complicated question: how can we effectively educate all students? With increased accountability for educators across the board due in part to "No Child Left Behind", many educators are asking themselves whether that question is logical. According to Chrisman (2005), many U.S. schools are being identified as low performing on the basis of low test scores. So the question remains: "How can we improve the quality of education our students are receiving?" Rand's "Objectivist" answer would be if they can pay for school let them stay. If they can not, put them to work. In the field of education and as an educator, to have this perspective would be to set up both our educations system and our students for failure. My position on education is that of an altruistic perspective and I am in opposition of the "objectivist" perspective having any place in education and having anyone involved in the process of educating others.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss and provide readers with different altruistic practices that may be used by educators to improve our education system. This article will incorporate practices that will provide a positive outcome for our students.

We Can Improve

We can improve the quality of the type of education students are receiving and the motivation behind their learning with the following: data-driven decisions, student engagement, educational values, character education, strong and positive educational leaders, competent and compassionate teachers, students feeling a sense of ownership with their school, and increased parental involvement.

Data-Driven Decisions

According to Ayn Rand (as cited in the Ayn Rand Institute, 2009, par. 4), "In order to live, man must act: in order to act, he must make choices; in order to make choices, he must define a code of values; in order to define a code of values, he must know what he is and where he is."

In order to determine the path you must take to achieve the ultimate goal of educating each child, you must "define a code of values"; you must interpret information to analyze where you are and where you must go. Rand (as cited in the Ayn Rand Institute, 2009, par. 4) stated that one must "Know his own nature." We believe achieving the ultimate goal is imperative in education. We seek strong, positive, and data-driven educational leaders. Strong educational leaders prepare their teachers by making sure they are teaching concepts and content, not "the test". This would be a perfect time to practice some of Ayn Rand's ideologies of "selfishness", but instead principals provide teachers and themselves with ample opportunities for staff development and other types of continued education. Educators understand and embrace the importance of educating all and providing those directly involved with educating our students with opportunities to develop new skills. Students' educational and social needs change from day to day, so it is highly important for any person involved in the education of students to develop an epistemological sense of awareness. This sense of awareness will give us the instructional knowledge, determination, and foundation to become life-long learners, not just of our subject area, but of our students and their needs. Valerie Chrisman (2005) observed schools in California to determine the similarities and differences between low performing schools that were able to improve test scores and low performing schools that were not able to improve. When conducting this study, she asked principals from schools who improved student performance what they did to improve student achievement. They stated that they let the data drive their decisions. Becoming a data-driven school and educational leader is imperative for the success of students, teachers, educational leaders, and school districts. The data is factual; if you ignore it, you are simply ignoring the facts.

Rand (1961) addressed the importance of debating or determining an objective by utilizing factual information, rather than emotional or illogical information (in the case of education) to determine the validity or need for certain programs. To argue without facts or data would be an "ad hominem", or a "fallacy consisting of attempting to refute an argument by impeaching the character of its proponent" (p.162).

By evaluating the data, you can assess the needs of your students. Once you assess these needs, intervention programs must be developed and professional development opportunities must be scheduled that utilize the data as its main source. Some educational leaders are not comfortable using data, which may be in part because they are unfamiliar with the ways of interpreting the data. The schools that were unsuccessful in the Chrisman (2005) study did not utilize data in determining which methods they should use to address the needs of their students.

Not only is it important for educational leaders to be data-driven, but teachers should utilize the data as well. Schools in Chrisman's study (2005) found that teachers

were more successful when they used data from their students' assessments to determine which instructional strategies and instructional environments encouraged student learning. These assessments provided teachers with the information needed to insure that students had the best opportunities for success.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is vital when discussing ways of increasing academic success. Students who feel a sense of ownership with their school will perform better academically. The school environment as a whole plays an important role in developing this concept of "school connectedness". According to Howard Gray (2007), Phase Five of his systematic model approach to changing the way educators work, "Engaging the Entire School Community", is imperative for students to perform at their fullest potential. Educators are not the only people who come in contact with these students. Students are very receptive of the total school environment. A custodian, para-professional, coach, or even an active parent who seems disenchanted by certain students will have a negative effect on everything schools are trying to accomplish. Ethically, I believe everyone must believe in our students' ability to become successful. Blum (2005) agrees that establishing and holding our students to high expectations will help increase a sense of school connectedness.

It is my opinion that all of this will be null and void if we can not get our parents involved in the educational process of our students. Students seek their parents' approval and acceptance; if the parents are not there for this reinforcement, students will seek it from another source, and unfortunately, that source is usually not a positive one.

Ayn Rand explains "individualism", in any form, "is an objective requirement of man's proper survival" (p.158). Adopting this perspective will be detrimental to the entire school community. It is my interpretation that Ayn Rand believes that we must not "sacrifice" ourselves at the benefit of others, but to incorporate the lifestyle of that of a barter. To have this "Survival of the Fittest" perspective will create a sense of division within the school community. This form of division is predestined to cause low academic performance and possible violence within the school environment.

With strong, data-driven intervention programs and professional development opportunities for educators and actively engaged students, educational systems will improve the quality of student learning.

Educational Values

Turn on the television, watch the news or any random television sitcom, open the newspaper, or go to the mall and you may be bombarded with the thought, "Where is John Galt" or "What has happened to our Axiology as a culture?" Have we determined that our values are no longer necessary to make appropriate decisions? Are we no longer concerned with metaphysics? It is no surprise that moral and ethical educational issues are of increasing concern. I have read several articles that discuss the importance of educators addressing the issues of moral standards and ethical decision-making skills, which Ferrero (2005) supports with his assertion that a student gaining a sense of self empathy and empathy for others is non-negotiable. The crime rate has risen in many cities across the world because some students and adults do not have the skills needed to make ethical decisions. According to Ayn Rand (1961), "Every living being is an end to himself, not the means to the ends of the welfare of others" (p. 30). It is this type of mentality that floods the minds of criminals. This laissez- faire attitude toward the well-being of others is, in my opinion, the underlying cause of the increasing crime rates in most American cities, which unfortunately filters into our school systems. It is Ayn Rand's (1961) own statement that a person's "...senses...do not tell him what will benefit his life or endanger it, what goals he should pursue and what means they will achieve them, what values his life depends on..." actually supports the necessity for schools to implement values and ethics into educating the whole child (p.21).

Character Education

There is no time like the present to teach character education and moral education. If we have never needed this before, we need it now. Some of our youth are not equipped with the skills needed to make quality decisions. In the time of conflict, many students turn to violence to solve the issue. Even Ayn Rand (1961) asserts that "...what [man] will consider good or evil...what he will love or hate...depends on his standard of value" (p.31). It makes sense that in adopting the concept of character and / or moral educations, districts are equipping their students with the skills needed to handle conflict appropriately since one's reaction to a conflict depends on one's "standard of value."
Conflict resolution skills provide students with a nonviolent alternative to resolving issues with others. Joseph and Efron (2005) group this as a component of "peace education" (p.528). The purpose of peace education is to introduce students to conflict resolution, peace studies, environmental education, global education, and human rights education. In essence, "They will examine the causes of war, develop a sense of appreciation and respect of those who are different from them, and understand basic human rights" (Joseph & Efron, 2005, p.528). These components are extremely important in developing ideal citizens for our communities. Students who have been introduced to these components will, in my opinion, gain a sense of empathy and respect

or others.

Although I believe that character/ moral education is a key factor in developing students' moral values, I also know that character education alone will not complete the task. As David Ferrero, (2005) states in *Pathways to Reform: Start with Values*, "philosophy" is a crucial and highly overlooked source. Ferrero (2005) explains philosophy as "the beliefs and values that create a sense of what makes life worth living, and therefore what is worth teaching and how we should teach" (p.8) The concepts and content that should be discussed and taught according to our Texas Essential and Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) are important, but should not be the end of our educational process of students. We must address the whole student. As educators, we are ineffective if we do not develop educated and productive members of society. We must strive to do both: educate on content and educate on values. I can not recall one educator, as Ferrero states, who went into education with the thought of increasing test scores. I decided education was my calling because I wanted to become a positive influence on students; it is my interpretation and perspective that I can not do this if I fall true to the "Objectivist" perspective identified in Ayn Rand's *The Virtues of Selfishness* (1961).

What Can Educators do to Help Students Become Caring, Morally Responsible People?

It is important to model that of altruism, the perspective which emphasizes the idea that "self-sacrifice and service to others is the highest moral duty" (Rand, p. 38). Providing students with opportunities to see others act in unselfish ways will give them more positive and resourceful means to emulate.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, Ayn Rand's "Objectivist" perspective has such a minute place in the field of education. If this perspective is incorporated instead of the aforementioned practices, we will see our education system recede just as our economic system is right now. Our children and our future depend on everyone taking an active role in educating each child as if he were your own. To be selfish is not an option. We all must recall the reasons that we chose education as our field of study and career. Hopefully, we all come to the conclusion that we are here for the students. We must not betray them by neglecting the entire person. We must develop both their desire to achieve a higher education and a desire to be a productive and positive member of society. We must guide

each student, as Ayn Rand states, to develop into a "...rational being through the whole of his lifespan—in all those aspects of existence which are open to his choice" (p. 26).

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